

SIGNS AND CASES

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INTRODUCTION

Any definitions of contemporary metalsmithing are provisional and exist in a state of flux. My relationship to my chosen discipline is tenuous and hard to explain. I feel no compulsion to value what others value or avoid what others avoid. I choose not to limit myself by any strict definition, but rather to continue exploring metalsmithing in ways that achieve a greater depth of meaning and complexity in the interaction of ideas and material.

I am very informed by the history of craft. It contains a wealth of information and content. However, I do not think that there is necessarily any value in the exclusive use of traditional craft media, the use of hand technologies, the use of conventional craft functions, or reference to the history of craft objects themselves.

As a maker I want to create well-crafted three-dimensional objects with socially relevant content. It is my goal that the work will maintain the highest level of accessibility for the broadest audience without neglecting the intellectual rigor required by the creative community. My work naturally reflects the sensibilities of a metalsmith. I am an object maker. I find importance in the hands-on experience of materials. My work is informed by the process of its making. I especially like the materials and techniques I have inherited through my discipline. I also make use of strategies offered by photography, printmaking, sculpture, painting, and conceptual art.

The most compelling thing about the objects I make often exist in their satirical and humorous pairing of dissonant elements. Usually a tension exists between what is

traditional and what is contemporary or progressive. The work often juxtaposes contemporary materials with traditional techniques or vice versa. Another prevalent element in the work is the combination of text and image. I often use original images from my Polaroid photography or from my drawings. The use of text is derived from many unrelated and divergent sources and models. I find inspiration and examples from Asian art, Northern Renaissance art, Dada, Surrealism, Pop-art, and Conceptual art. The effect of the text is inconsistent. Sometimes the words reinforce the work, other times it is used to create ambiguity by contradiction.

Ultimately, the work is a kind of result which occurs in a stream of consciousness pairing of the familiar, common experiences of contemporary culture with something seemingly transcendent, religious, or mythic. My approach is like thinking of the existence of God and what you are going to have for lunch simultaneously and making art about that amalgam. The experiences of the familiar would include things like: driving around town, trying to park, traffic, going to rent videos, picking out cd's, looking at magazines, watching TV, talking on the phone, wishing you were somewhere else, trying to listen to someone, surfing the net, going for a walk, doing laundry, cooking, washing dishes, taking a shower, neurotic compulsions, staring-off, daydreaming, eating candy, people-watching, wasting time, going to the movies, going to get coffee, going to get lunch, going to the rest room. Examples of the transcendent would include: the bible, the art history books, the dictionary, religious reliquaries, existentialism, Zen, haiku poems, sonnets, sex, museums, chaos theory, math, geometry, quantum physics, artists, celebrities, saints, demons, metaphysics, a leap of faith, Greek mythology, prophets, Andy Warhol, Vincent Van Gogh, Dada, song lyrics, the worst sins, nature,

migrations, hibernation, bees, ant colonies, instinct, dinosaurs, Satan, genetics, and fashion models.

Within this context, I came to identify signs and cases, in their many varied forms. In my mind, these signs and cases were crossed referenced between my familiar experiences of driving around town or looking for the rest room and my pondering on religion or modern art. Signs and cases have the capacity of being marked by multiplicity of meaning. For example, signs exist in different ways in relation to art theory, philosophy, religion, craft, deaf people, astrology, music, mathematics, law, sports, plant biology, urban planning, advertising, and anyone looking for a public rest room. As objects, I am aware of the examples of signs by historical blacksmiths, contemporary urban planners, as well as those by conceptual artists like Jenny Holzer. Cases exist similarly. There are criminal cases, basket cases, bad cases of..., cd cases, case bearers, casebooks, case goods, case histories, case loads, or case work. As objects, I am aware of cases by traditional craftspeople, contemporary product designers, and by contemporary artist like Damien Hirst. These signs and cases seem to be a potent vehicle for simultaneously addressing my many concerns.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

I would like to explore the possible multiple meanings of the words sign and case. Both of these words have significance and history within the creative community. In addition, these words defined as objects have existed historically within the field of metalsmithing and have many prevalent contemporary applications. These formats

contain inherent qualities, such as broad familiarity, real functions, and associated context, whether inside or out, public or private. I would like to utilize these qualities for the purpose of satire and humor.

The following questions will be addressed:

1. How can I most effectively use both the traditions of metalsmithing and contemporary art approaches simultaneously to make more conceptually complex objects?
2. How can I best utilize the multiplicity of meanings which the words sign and case offer to the effect of humor and satire?
3. How can I best utilize the inherent qualities of signs and cases as formats for investigating presentations that would be accessible, confrontational or interactive?

METHODOLOGY

I completed four art pieces centered primarily on the problems and ideas discussed above. The progressive development of the work is visible when viewed in relationship to a larger body of related works. The complete body of work was exhibited publicly in the Cora Stafford Gallery.

DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK AND ANALYSIS

When I started this I didn't know what was going to happen. I did not want to try to imagine it. I wanted the pieces to develop intuitively and organically. When I try to come up with a complete idea for an art object the end product is usually contrived, predictable, and uninteresting. I get better results when I am not focused on the end product, but more simply responding to small tasks and decisions. In addition, I feel an external pressure to justify using metalsmithing. Although sometimes I find them confining, traditions and conventions can be a useful structure for an artist to work in. Sometimes I think traditional or conventional painting would be easier than what I do. There is a standard almost invisible material and format. For example, if an artist uses a standard size stretched canvas no one thinks about the cotton canvas signifying the south and the history of cotton picking. However, in regard to many things associated with metalsmithing as a field there is a strong prejudice and a greater critical scrutiny. Due to this scrutiny, I try to be more aware of my entire production.

I tried to break up my work into small tasks and decisions. The most productive way for me to work is to break-up the process into five progressive steps of decision making. These steps would be to first deal with the materials that would be employed in the production. Next, I would decide the appropriate techniques to manipulate this material. Then, the appropriate format of the piece can be determined. Finally, at some unpredictable moment, the production is considered finished and the product would be given a title, marking the real completion of the artwork.

I spent considerable time trying to find a suitable material. I started with enamels on metal. I liked the idea of using the traditional material of metalsmithing. There are

lots of examples of enameled signs in western culture. These include historical examples in Europe, especially in Germany and England. In addition, there are also many recent examples from the United States, like old gas station signs and soft drink advertising signs. Nonetheless, I did not get any promising results from the samples I completed. Enamel seemed too heavily laden with traditional associations and decadence to be a suitable material for my purposes. Next, I explored plastics. I liked their bright, playful color and the fact that it is a prominent material in our culture. However, in my hands it proved to be too fragile of a material. It proved to be easily damaged by cracking, chipping, or scratching. Furthermore, it seemed to me at the time to have a hard to define, shallow, one dimensional character. Plastic is used in so many things in contemporary culture that, although it is prominently used in sign making, it seemed to lack any one strong association. For some time I was without an answer. I could not think of what material to use. I went to a scrap metal yard looking for some ideas. I had been to this particular scrap yard many times alone, but this time I was accompanied by a new friend who had never been there. That friend came across something I had never noticed, a bin of retired street signs. At the time I had completely overlooked it as a possible material. It seemed too easy and too obvious. Street signs had many great qualities. They are almost universal in their presence and applications. They provide a spectacular palette of bright, glowing, reflective color. Furthermore, their colors also carry strong associations of their meaning. For example, red means stop, yellow means caution, orange means construction, and so on. The signs also had an aged, but still recent, quality. That is to say, although these particular signs were retired because of their

fading color and scratches, they were still the same type of signs that are currently used. I gathered a varied palette of colors that day.

I now had my material. This raised the next question of how to manipulate it. I next focused on samples of appropriate techniques. Due to the fact that the color is essentially a plastic sticker on a sheet of rigid, but brittle aluminum sheet, the signs proved resistant to much of anything except for shaping by sawing and filing. It seemed that sawing with my jeweler's saw provided the most possibilities because of its greater capacity for detailed cutting, although this would limit the scale of the pieces to the clearance of the saw. The other techniques I explored seemed to be either ineffective or to negate the qualities for which I had chosen the signs. Now I had determined my material and the appropriate technique to manipulate it. But in what shapes should I saw my signs, and then what to do with these limited scale shapes?

I stared at the signs sitting in my studio for a week or two. I was getting to know them. I noticed how the colors appeared in different lighting conditions and at different viewing positions. I noticed how filing the edges exposed the aluminum and provided a nice contrast and framing to the bright colors. I began to think about the sign material as being a visual hybrid of my previously considered materials. The signs had the color and reflection of enamel on metal. At the same time you could perceive a certain mundane ordinariness, that it was not opulent enamel, but a plastic sticker. I started thinking about the signs qualities of being associated with public and outdoor display. I thought it might be interesting to work with these qualities in contrast to a more personal theme and indoor display.

One day I was sitting at home watching TV, just flipping through the channels. I came across a figure skating competition and then a ballroom dancing competition. I was overwhelmingly struck by the peculiarity of these things to me. Although the males were competing with female partners, they seemed so *gay* to me. In both events males participated in tight-fitting flamboyant costumes and were noticeably wearing make-up. I thought *if those guys aren't gay, they sure look like it!* Recently I had also watched a show on the *Discovery Channel* about hermaphrodites. The program emphasized the biological nature of gender and the tenuous, delicate chemistry of sexual orientation. A large percentage of the hermaphrodites profiled on the show had over compensated their personas in order to put forward a definite sexual identity. This brought to mind a panel discussion I had attended about five or six years ago arguing the Biblical stances on contemporary moral issues, namely the status of homosexuals and homosexuality within both the Christian community and the culture at large. In the discussion a panelist representing a predominantly gay church had attempted to forward the example of the Biblical characters of David and Jonathan as precedents for homosexual sexual preference. The characters are represented in the somewhat obscure Biblical text to both have extremely masculine outward personas as well as having a love for each other greater than that of a woman. In addition, the text confers that Jonathan's love was great enough to defy his father in his allegiance to David. This seemed like inspiration for art.

For *Outward Signs/Inward Feelings* I found two images of male gymnasts. Both were generic images that were actually the illustrations from my dictionary for the words *horse* and *parallel bars*. While demonstrating great masculine strength and discipline, the persona of the gymnast is usually considered gay, not dissimilar to the perception of male

interior decorators. It happened that the illustrations both had the gymnast pointing their toes at similar angles but in opposite directions. Not only did the pointed toes reinforce the *gay* perception of the gymnast, but it also served my compositional considerations. I could use the images facing one another to imply that not only were they performing for one another, but possibly also engaged in a kind of dance indicating courtship. I used these images to cut out silhouettes from the red portion of a stop sign. The glittering red provided an ambiguous quality of at once being a color denoting love and also the red of a stop sign. I thought it would be interesting to place these silhouettes in front of heart-shaped silhouettes approximately the size of heart-shaped candy boxes. These were cut out of mirror-polished diamond plate aluminum, which is most often seen used on truck tool boxes. I thought this provided a masculine material contrast to the heart shapes indicating courtship. I drilled holes in the silhouettes corresponding to the approximate location of the gymnast's anuses. This was to imply a sexual orifice. I used the holes to pop-rivet the silhouettes spaced in front of the hearts. This allowed the back side of the silhouettes to be seen reflected in the mirror finish of the aluminum diamond plate. On the back sides of the silhouettes I had hand-written in reverse with a black marker the repeated phrases *Who's your Daddy? Who do you love?*. I used these phrases both to reference the Biblical story of David and Jonathan and also a sexual innuendo. The reading of a sexual innuendo was reinforced by the hand-written marker text and its association with bathroom wall graffiti. I then sawed out the text *David and Jonathan* in the *Bauhaus* font out of the same red stop sign. I used the *Bauhaus* font both because it was appropriately modern and decorative, and because the shapes of the interiors of the letters were round. The round interiors of the letters were used to rivet the text spaced in

front of a generic cartoon dialogue bubble from clip art. I sawed out the dialogue bubble from the same polished aluminum diamond plate as had been the hearts. The rivets in the text were meant to reinforce and emphasize the idea of the sexual orifice. The finished piece consists of the three components being installed on a wall so that the gymnasts' toes point to one another and the dialogue bubble is off to the right side. After seeing the piece installed I decided on the title *Outward Signs/Inward Feelings*. This title is intended to imply a relationship between the outwardly visible elements of the piece with the text which is only seen in reflection. It is a play on the meaning of the word sign. It creates a tension between the interpretation of the meaning of the word sign as either a noun or a verb. As a noun it parallels both the stop sign material and the outwardly observable persona. As a verb it parallels both the function of the stop sign and the gesture of the personality.

Doing the work on *Outward Signs/Inward Feelings* started me thinking about my own love life. My serious girlfriend of three years had recently left me. I had quickly rebounded in and out of another relationship. I still felt sad about the end of the long term relationship, and I felt embarrassed and unstable because of the rebounding. I wanted to do something with these events that had so deeply affected me. I knew that although these events were traumatic for me, they were also cliché, commonplace, and almost mundane. I wanted to share my personal feelings of deepest grief while acknowledging the fact that it happens to everyone at sometime or another, and that ultimately my story was not that impressive or unique. I wanted to use the word love. The word itself is in millions of popular songs, but it remains a mysterious and unique experience. I wanted to work through my pain with humor. I thought of the different

ways I could use text. Examples that I drew influence from were illuminated manuscripts from the Northern Renaissance, but also from newspaper rebuses, from Shakespearean sonnets, but also Willie Nelson songs.

For *Sign of Lament: Stop Bouncing In and Out of Love* I sawed out the letters *L*, *O*, and *E* from the red part of a stop sign. I found in my dictionary an illustration for the definition of the word *trampoline*. The illustration was of a man bouncing on a trampoline. When translated into a silhouette the man's body made a shape similar to that of a letter *V*. I sawed out eight of the silhouettes of the man, each approximately the same size as the previously sawed letters. I mounted the letters and silhouettes on the wall so that the letters and one of the silhouettes spell the word love, while the other seven silhouettes give the appearance of the man going in and out of the word love. When I tried to think of an appropriate title, I first thought of *Falling In and Out of Love*. However, this did not fully express the idea in the grandest and also most humorous sense. I thought of *Sign of Lament* to express the magnitude of grief and combined it with *Stop Bouncing In and Out of Love* to express the resolve to deal with this pain with humor. The effect of the use of the phrase *Sign of Lament* was complex. The title acts to give the work a tone of seriousness and provides a tension between the words love and lament. Without the word lament in the title the work could be read as being only playful and about the euphoria of the experience of love. The word sign can be understood on one level as the physical stop sign material that was employed, but also its function in the world as a signal to stop.

After a while, I began to run out of areas of pure red available from the stop signs. All I had left was the text *STOP*. I would go into my studio and be greeted by this

imposing image. I began to think about where I was in my life. My long term relationship had come to a *STOP*. My rebound relationship had come to a *STOP*. School was about to come to a *STOP*. My inspiration for art making had come to a *STOP*. I was very frustrated with my situation. For awhile I quit bothering to even go into my studio. One night I was feeling overwhelmed by my ongoing case of artist block so I tried to do something to break out of my slump. I locked myself up in my apartment and turned off the lights. I put in the cd *Goodbye 20th Century* by Sonic Youth. It is a double cd of cover songs by 20th century experimental music composers. I lay down, closed my eyes and tried to stop thinking about my frustration. After over an hour of listening to this cd a cover of John Cage's *Four*⁶ came on. It is a thirty minute composition of a random monotony of atonal noise. About twenty minutes into the composition I heard Kim Gordon start yelling *Let's go!* over and over about thirty times. I thought *Yeah!* I wanted to make something to illustrate this moment of personal existential victory over a psychological hindrance. Although nothing readily apparent had happened, my whole view of the world had changed. In illustrating this moment, the idea of transcendence should be dressed in the clothes of the mundane.

For *Sign of Defiance: Nothings Gonna Stop Me Now!* I sawed-up the *STOP* of the stop sign. This made the work cathartic and the most performative in nature. I was physically destroying something that had signified a hindrance to my existence. From the *Stop* of the stop sign I sawed out the phrase *Let's go!* three times in a *Comic sans* font. The font gave the work a sense of humor. It was an act of ultimate defiance. Instead of shrinking in fear, I was laughing and moving on. I had imagined the cadence of the words when spoken out loud to determine the number of times to repeat it. The cadence of three

times sounded like the impatience of a child waiting for his parents to take him to Disneyland or like the encouragement of a baseball coach to his little leaguers. After I had sawed- out the letters, I filed the edges to expose the aluminum. The effect was decorative and worked to subdue the reading of the material as a stop sign. The red, white, and aluminum color gives more of an impression of a Coke brand logo. This rendered the stop sign as my personal signifier for ultimate destruction completely impotent. I installed the text on the wall with *Velcro* in three horizontal rows. In giving the work a title, I used *Sign of Defiance* to create a tension between the reading of the stop sign material and the text sawed from it. Although the title seems to advocate what could be a dangerous defiance of convention and law, the work does not seem malevolent. *Nothings Gonna Stop Me Now* occurred to me while listening to a song titled *Piggy* by *Nine Inch Nails*. The song contains this phrase in its lyrics. Within the song the phrase is ominous, and seemingly self-destructive. However, removed from this context it seems benign and optimistic.

Initially, it was my intentions to have the work in the signs carry over into the cases. In fact, in many ways the cases are similar to the signs. However, after many attempts I realized that I would have to find some separate solutions for the cases. I found success in my samples with plastics. I found that their transparency allowed for an object to be completely encased and still visible. In addition, the plastic could be layered with different objects in each layer. I spent some time getting to know my plastic sheets. They seemed to bring to mind playful toy-like qualities. In thinking about cases as objects I considered the important relationship between the container and the contained. I thought

that I could saw out many identical silhouette shapes, layer them, and rivet them together to make a free standing object.

I spent considerable time thinking about how to do *A Case of Two Sides to Every Comic Dialogue Bubble: The Mind/Body Problem*. During this time a couple of things occurred that strongly influenced my decisions. One thing was the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC and the subsequent public discussions. I was impressed by the possibility of two cultures which viewed themselves as highly moral to view each other as completely evil. During this time I also began to have conversations with several photographers. I became impressed by the ability of a photograph to exist as an object itself while also functioning as an indexical referent to something else. In addition, I was influenced by many different types of objects, such as medieval saint reliquaries, light boxes, toys, snow globes, minimalist sculpture, and hand mirrors.

For *A Case of Two Sides to Every Comic Dialogue Bubble: The Mind/Body Problem* I sawed out 8 identically shaped clip art comic dialogue bubbles out of different plastics. The scale of the bubbles was relatively small, but comparable with the scale of those objects which had influenced me. These bubbles were stacked together. For each side of the stack I sawed out a mirror layer, a transparent color layer and two clear layers. The colors I chose were transparent royal blue for one side and transparent neon yellow for the other. On the royal blue side I layered cut out shapes from some pictures I had taken of clouds. My hope was that the clouds would call to mind the common game of designating shapes in clouds. For example, saying that a cloud looks like George Washington. The cut out shapes included clef shapes, fleur-de-lis shapes, small squares, one griffin and one man with his hand raised. It was my intension to use imagery

comparable of that used in the northern renaissance reliquaries. Because the mirror was in the back layer, and the cut-outs were layered in succession above, an interesting reflective effect occurs in different angles. In the layers I also included some of the plastic dust from the sawing to enhance the layered effect by delineating the layers and also to give the impression of snow, like a snow globe. For the opposite side of the stack I took another approach. I found in my dictionary the illustration for the word *fingerprint* and the illustration for the word *brain*. It was my hope that the use of these images juxtaposed might allude to the mind body relationship in a ridiculously over-simplistic diagrammatic representation. From these illustrations I made transparencies. I emphasized the effect of the layers using three transparencies of the fingerprint illustration in the back layer and two of the brain illustration in the front layer. On this side the mirror also created a reflective effect when viewed at different angles. In addition, the mirror reflects light through the neon layer enhancing its glowing effect. This neon effect is particularly dramatic when viewed from above where only the edges of the layers can be seen. In contrast to the frontal view which is decorative, the top view is very much like minimalist sculpture. I drilled four opposing holes in through the stack and used aluminum tubing to rivet the layers together. The piece is meant to be set on its bottom edge so that both sides are visible and it functions in the round. *A Case of Two Sides to Every Comic Dialogue Bubble* is meant to be light-hearted and humorous and seem like an over-simplistic descriptive phrase. It was my intent that this might also reference the idea of *two sides to every argument*. *The Mind/Body Problem* is meant to indicate a specific argument to which there might be two sides and also to indicate a way of reading the *brain* and *fingerprint* images.

CONCLUSION

In analyzing this work it is observable that the strategies employed were an amalgamation of both traditional metalsmithing and contemporary art. The almost exclusive and sensitive use of metal, the exclusive use of hand technologies, and the smaller more intimate formats suggest the sensibilities of a metalsmith. In contrast, however, the types of tasks that these works are employed in, the almost performative nature of the work, and the self-effacing humorous satire imply something more aligned to contemporary art. The work is the mulatto love child of two separate and distinct dialogues about creativity and its physical manifestations. It has the capacity to enter into either domain, but not without stares and whispers, and not with complete acceptance. But this is its strength and vitality. It has an air of mystery. You are not exactly sure where its allegiances are. I hope its allegiances remain loyal to both dialogues and to neither. That is to say, I hope that the work feels free to borrow from, and to explore both dialogues, but also remains loyal only to its own integrity and never submits to any other agenda.

Accordingly, I suggest that there are two types of beauty that exist. I offer one as classical beauty, which is the highest fulfillment of standardized expectations through traditional and conventional formats. I describe the other as a type of hybrid between classical beauty and something considered not beautiful. Although what is beautiful or not beautiful might be said to always be local and framed by changing dialogues, things of this hybrid beauty can participate in different dialogues about art or culture, but are never ghettoized into only one. Things of this beauty can appear similar enough to classical beauty to be sometimes confused with it. However, sometimes they can be seen

as perverse and subversive. There is always an element of ambiguity. These things always contain qualities that are unexpected, unpredictable, enigmatic and unique.

This is the type of beauty I am inspired by and compelled to pursue. I propose it is essentially about freedom. It is an unwillingness to exclude any alternatives, possibilities, or ways. In fact, I would speculate that it is not about finding any one right way, but, instead, it is an interest in all the other ways.



Outward Signs/Inward Feelings



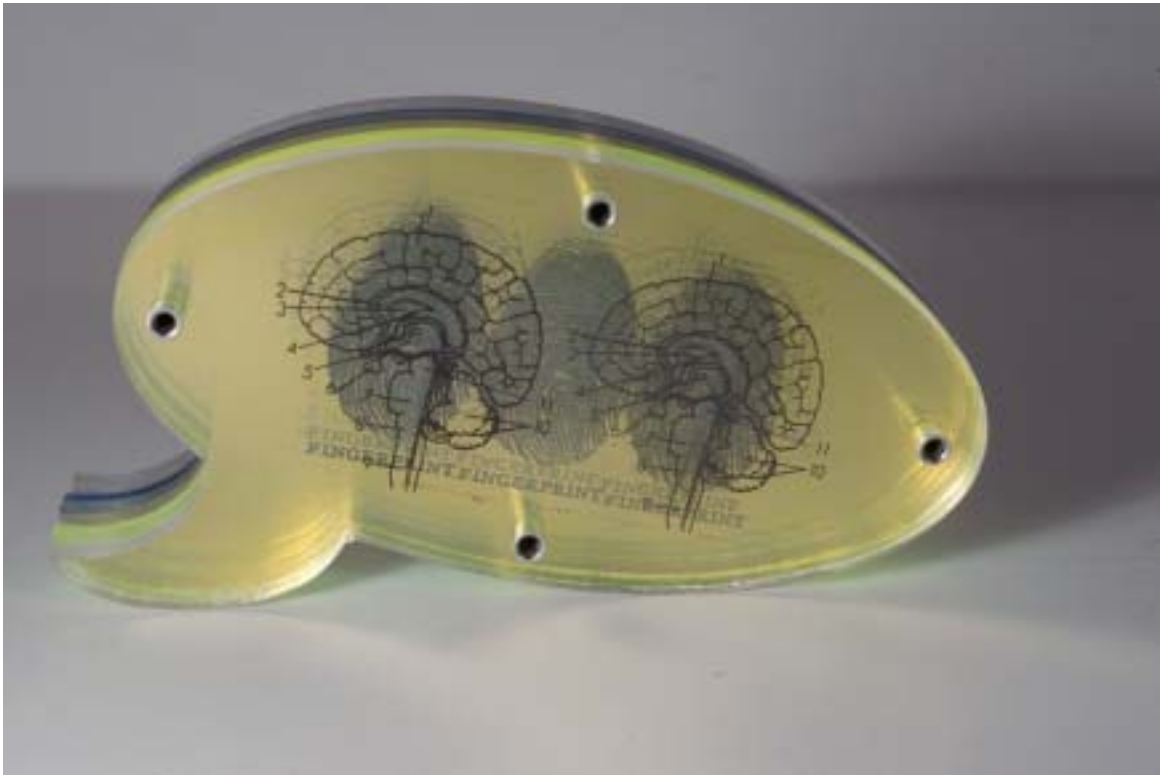
Sign of Lament: Stop Bouncing In and Out of Love



Sign of Defiance: Nothings Gonna Stop Me Now



A Case of Two Sides to Every Comic Dialogue Bubble: The Mind Body Problem (front)



A Case of Two Sides to Every Comic Dialogue Bubble: The Mind Body Problem (back)